

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE FRANK A. LoBIONDO, CHAIRMAN –
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COAST GUARD AND MARITIME TRANSPORTATION
OVERSIGHT HEARING ON COAST GUARD MISSION CAPABILITIES

MAY 11, 2006

The Subcommittee is meeting this morning to review the Coast Guard's capabilities to carry out its many traditional and maritime homeland security missions, as well as to examine the progress of several systems designed to enhance Maritime Domain Awareness.

Over the last five years, the Coast Guard's budget, personnel level and mission scope have expanded to meet the service's increased responsibilities for maritime homeland security. However, it is unclear whether these enhanced maritime homeland security responsibilities are affecting the Coast Guard's ability to carry out its many traditional missions.

A GAO report in 2004 revealed that resource hours for many of the Coast Guard's traditional missions have decreased as demands of the port security mission have increased. While I do not believe the number of hours devoted to each mission is a true indication of mission performance, I am concerned the Coast Guard's traditional missions may not be receiving the same level of priority as the homeland security missions.

At the same time, Coast Guard legacy vessels are increasingly unavailable due to operational restrictions or unscheduled maintenance caused by the unexpected deterioration of the assets. For instance, the 110-foot patrol boat fleet has experienced numerous hull failures creating an overall readiness gap. These vessels will be replaced under the Deepwater program, but I'm concerned how any shortfall in asset readiness will affect the Coast Guard's mission capabilities in the meantime.

I hope to hear more this morning on the Coast Guard's plans to maintain a balance between all of its missions and about the actions the Coast Guard has taken to improve the efficiency of each of its missions.

The Coast Guard is currently in the process of employing improved technology systems to enhance its awareness of activities occurring within the maritime domain. The Coast Guard has begun the nationwide implementation of the Automatic Identification System (AIS) in U.S. ports and coastal waters. AIS will enhance the Coast Guard's capabilities to target and track vessels as they enter and exit our Nation's ports. This system, when coupled with a long-range vessel tracking system, will allow the Coast Guard to monitor commercial vessel traffic up to 2000 miles from shore.

Under current law, the Coast Guard is required to develop and implement a long range vessel tracking system; however, no such system is in place today. I believe we must extend our tracking capabilities beyond our immediate coastal waters. I realize the Coast Guard is working through the International Maritime Organization to develop international standards for such a system, but this should not stop the United States from instituting its own program in the interim.

I hope the witnesses will provide us an update on this important program and an idea of when we should expect a final system to be implemented.

Lastly, the Coast Guard is in the process of recapitalizing its maritime control, command and communications system through the Rescue 21 program. This program will allow Coast Guard personnel to respond faster to maritime emergencies through the use of direction-finding equipment that will aid in locating distressed mariners. Rescue 21 is already in place in my home state of New Jersey, and we have seen the tremendous upgrades this program provides.

I hope to hear more on the plan for the implementation of this system nationwide and on how the Coast Guard plans to incorporate the capabilities of this program with the service's other Maritime Domain Awareness initiatives.

I thank the witnesses for appearing this morning and I look forward to hearing their testimony.